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SUBJECT: BELIZE SECURITY ASSESSMENT

REF: STATE 51747

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Leonard Hill, Reasons 1.4(b)(d)

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¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Our assessment, based on discussions within Country Team and with regional law enforcement officers covering Belize, is that inclusion in regional efforts to strengthen border protection and to combat alien smuggling would be of great benefit. Anti-gang efforts aimed at preventing gangs from becoming rooted here would also be extremely useful. Programs to reduce corruption and improve governance remain important. A new government elected in February has shown greater willingness than its predecessor to work closely with us and has requested funding for specific law enforcement and security goals. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Embassy appreciates the opportunity to comment on security requirements for Belize as part of a broader regional strategy. We note that the crime situation here, while different from that of CARICOM neighbors, is not moving in a positive direction. Belize could definitely benefit from inclusion in regional programs, and at a political level would welcome the opportunity to expand the activities and effectiveness of CARICOM. We anticipate that Belize would also seek to foster law enforcement cooperation between Central America (SICA countries) and CARICOM.

POROUS BORDERS

¶3. (C) From our perspective the major security problem Belize faces stems from lack of control over its borders. Alien, drug and arms smuggling are serious problems that are not getting better. Corruption allegations have reached the top ranks of the Immigration and Customs departments, and problems appear pervasive at the police working levels. The Embassy has made some headway with the establishment of a small Belize National Coast Guard and the use of Enduring Friendship money to equip and train a military Special Boat Unit for border patrols. Through military and other channels

we are providing training and equipment to help Belize better control its borders and airspace.

¶4. (C) Ultimately, the problem with border control and alien smuggling comes down to personnel resources. Belize has large land and maritime borders and a population of less than 300,000. Employing huge numbers of people to guard the borders simply isn't practical or economically viable. Inclusion in an effective regional border control program, however, could be useful as a way to combine efforts with other countries to make the most of the relatively few people that Belize can deploy for this task.

GANG PREVENTION

¶5. (C) The gangs currently operating in Belize are largely home-grown neighborhood affairs focusing on the retail drug trade. Drug related violence is a growing problem. Belize does not yet seem to have well-established transnational gangs, but indications are that this situation will not last much longer. MS-13 "tags" have been spotted in several areas of the country and our assessment is that it is only a matter of time before organized violent gangs start to move in from other countries.

¶6. (C) Belize could benefit from being part of a regional anti-gang strategy that would also include Central American countries. The focus here would be on prevention: educating youth; doing more, and more effective, community policing in areas likely to be afflicted by gangs; seeing regional best practices for legislation; and training police and prosecutors to investigate and prosecute gang-related crime. Another useful idea is that of exchanges between police department in the region and in cities like Los Angeles where there is significant expertise in preventing and combating gangs.

¶7. (C) We understand that LEGATT San Salvador is considering establishing a Regional Anti-Gang Officer position. We believe that Belize could benefit from inclusion in this program.

GOVERNANCE

¶8. (C) Belize needs to be included in regional efforts to combat corruption. Our sense is that the corruption among government officials (elected as well as public servants) and the police grew to major proportions during the previous government. That may be changing (see Para 10 and 11) but public confidence in institutions like the police is low, although the military and Coast Guard are still held in relatively high esteem. From our perspective anti-corruption efforts are fundamental to anything we want to do in the security sphere. If the community has no confidence in the police, in immigration, in customs, then much of the time, money and effort we expend to improve border security or to prevent gang formation will be wasted.

¶9. (C) The anti-corruption aspect of the strategy will be the hardest to craft and execute, but in the end it is probably the most important. Without it, we have a difficult time seeing how corrupt individuals and institutions which lack public support can possibly be effective in improving the country's -- or the region's -- security situation. We think the new government represents an important opportunity for those who want to see positive change.

UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

¶10. (C) The February 2008 election brought to power a government that seems to take security, law enforcement and anti-corruption issues more seriously than did its predecessor. From the first meetings the Ambassador had with Prime Minister Barrow, Attorney General/Foreign Minister Elrington and National Security Minister Perdomo, the GOB has

been saying the right things about wanting to work closely with us to go after drug trafficking and other security threats. The new government has been receptive to recommendations from DEA and the RSO on where the police department can be improved. The government has also sought USG help in developing its capability to deal with at-risk youth and intervene before teenagers fall into gangs.

¶11. (C) The government appreciates our strong continuing support for the Belize Defense Force, including counterterrorism training, and our role in creating a viable Coast Guard. Specific new assistance requests from Cabinet members to us (all reported in previous cables) include:

- Vetting for police, counterterrorism and immigration officers
- Wireless intercept capability for intelligence gathering and targeting
- Additional specific police training, including counternarcotics
- Assistance for the Department of Public Prosecutions to enable better prosecution of crimes
- Forensic audit assistance to determine where government assets have been misappropriated
- Assistance for the Financial Intelligence Unit to improve its investigative capability
- Creation of a DNA lab
- Gang prevention assistance
- National crime information management system
- Improved border information management.

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